

15. THE SANDWICH TERN (*STERNA SANDVICENSIS*)
IN SRI LANKA

During almost 6 weeks, from the 16th February to the 28th of March, 1986, I was able to observe every day several Sandwich Terns, varying in number from 1 to 6. These birds were resting throughout most of the day on two rocks in the sea about 200 yards off the coast at Colombo, south of the Lighthouse. These rocks are habitually used during the late North-East Monsoon and the intermonsoonal season up to about May by various species of Terns, notably Large Crested Terns (*Sterna bergii*), Lesser Crested Terns (*Sterna bengalensis*), always few in number, Whiskered Terns (*Chlidonias hybrida*), Common Terns (*Sterna hirundo*) in varying numbers, intermittently by Little Terns (*Sterna albigrons*), and occasionally White-winged Black Terns (*Chlidonias leucopterus*). As I live nearby on top of a 5-storey building, I have excellent opportunities of watching these birds through binoculars and by means of an Optolyth 30 × 75 telescope. I have indulged in this pastime over a number of years and have, for instance, been able to show that the Common Tern is by no means as rare or irregular a visitor to the Colombo coast as had been assumed; most of the Common Terns seen here are first and second year birds. Incidentally, I also discovered a breeding colony of this Tern on a small island composed entirely of coral debris about a mile off the east coast near Mankerni in May 1980 (see Ceylon Bird Club Notes, May 1980, p. 27-29, June, p. 31-32, July, p. 39-40, and August, p. 43).

Except for one, the up to 6 Sandwich Terns which I observed at Colombo were first or second year birds. Their identity was established beyond any doubt on the basis of the clearly visible yellow tip of the bill as well

as other characteristic features. Their behaviour on the rock was very much the same as that of the other Terns. During the first half of the day from about 9 a.m. onwards, they would sit and preen themselves, occasionally jostling for position, taking off and coming back when disturbed by House Crows (*Corvus splendens*), rarely feeding on nearby shoals of sardines. All the Terns are easily put to flight by the approach of a single Crow; Crows make it a habit to do this at frequent intervals and even chase some Terns, apparently for sheer mischief. I have even noted the Terns to take to the air with the approach of a White-breasted Kingfisher (*Halcyon smyrnensis*) and when a Brahminy Kite (*Haliastur indus*) soared high above. They all are very timid birds despite the formidable looking bills and never resist the intruders into their domain. In the afternoons the Terns just sit, always looking in the direction of the wind, often with beaks open. The one Sandwich Tern noticed on 21st February was in Summer plumage, with fully developed black cap, whereas the others showed the black and white speckled sides of the crown, typical of immatures throughout the period they were here. I have not seen any Sandwich Terns since the 28th of March and assume that they would have started on their return migration, presumably to the Black Sea area. The Common and Lesser Crested Terns disappeared soon afterwards.

According to the HANDBOOK (Vol. 3, p. 70) the Sandwich Tern is a winter visitor in fair numbers to West Pakistan, but there is only one sight record in India from Gujarat in 1958. In the latest issue of the *Journal* of the BNHS (Vol. 82, No. 2, August 1985, p. 410) there is a note of a record of a ring recovery

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from the Ernakulam District in Kerala in March 1976. The bird had been ringed as a juvenile the year before (on 26.6.75) at the Krasnovodsk Reserve, Krasnovodsk Gulf, Caspian Sea, Turkmenian SSR. It is noted that the publication came 9 years after the recovery! The author states that no specimen has so far been collected in India and that there are no recent sight records of this species.

In December 1977 a ring from a Sandwich Tern was recovered at Kalpitiya, Sri Lanka. This bird had been ringed on 27.7.77 as a juvenile in the Astrakhan Reserve, which is a small island in the Northern part of the Caspian Sea, USSR. This was the first record and evidence of the presence of the Sandwich Tern in Sri Lanka, which was followed by sight records as below:

1 at Talaimannar	..	21.9.78
2 at Negombo	..	4.11.78
10 at Talaimannar	..	5.10.79
1 at Talaimannar	..	3.2.80
1 at Colombo	..	10.2.80
1 at Point Pedro	..	23.2.81

The present observation of up to 6 Sandwich Terns for a period of nearly 6 weeks at Colombo is the first record of the presence in Sri Lanka of this species for a period of time and clearly indicates that it is in the process of extending its winter range very substantially and in some numbers. It is possible, even probable, that the birds were in Sri Lanka, if not at Colombo, throughout the winter; they were not noted by me earlier as my observations of the rock were quite sporadic till then. The presence of an adult bird in Summer plumage on 21.2 on only that day indicates that the wintering birds are

moving around along the Sri Lankan coasts, but most seem to be immatures.

Amongst the other Terns the Sandwich Tern is easy to distinguish (yellow tip of bill) with good binoculars if one is close enough, or with a telescope, as in my case, but obviously not if these amenities are lacking. In size the Sandwich Tern is between the Large Crested and the Lesser Crested, but it is distinguished from both by being much whiter, which is particularly noticeable in flight. Once I had become aware of the presence of the Sandwich Terns, I could pick them out sitting amongst the others with the naked eye from a distance of over 500 metres merely on the basis of the characteristics of size and whiteness. I cannot see how the Sandwich Tern can be confused with the Gull-billed Tern (*Gelochelidon nilotica*) although both are of similar size and coloration, but apart from this they are different in shape and particularly in the size and form of the bill which is much more pointed and much longer in the Sandwich Tern; even the small crest is noticeable in the silhouette which is much more like that of a Crested Tern than that of a Gull-billed Tern. I have never seen the latter on the Colombo coast, though they are plentiful inland during the winter season.

From about December or January to May Terns of the species listed above can be seen on these particular rocks at Colombo which affords excellent opportunities for studying moulting patterns and changes in the coloration of the bill, feet, etc., because during this period all the species change over to Summer plumage. At the moment all the Large Crested and most of the Whiskered and Little Terns are in breeding plumage. In earlier years before the onset of the SW Monsoon when they all disappear, I have

often observed prenuptial display by Large Crested Terns, with ritualised offering of small fish to females (e.g. Ceylon Bird Club Notes,

April 1978, p. 25). On 20.4.86 I noted 2 instances of mating and one offering of a small fish which was accepted.

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CEYLON BIRD CLUB NOTES (monthly) (1980): May, June, July and August.

PHILLIPS, W. W. A. (1978): Annotated Checklist of the Birds of Ceylon. Sri Lanka. p. 25.

P.S.: "Since writing the above (or foregoing) I have naturally been on the lookout for Sandwich Terns this season as well. The first bird appeared on 18th January amongst 60 Large Crested Terns and about 20 Lesser Crested Terns. Subsequently the number increased to 3, which I continue to observe daily. I expect them to leave around mid-March like last year". (27-2-1987).

16. KASHMIR ROLLER (*CORACIAS GARRULUS* LINNAEUS) IN RANEBENNUR, KARNATAKA

On 30 September 1984, we were returning to the Forest Rest House at Ranebennur (14°37'N, 75°32'E) at about 0945 hrs, after sighting a male Great Indian Bustard (*Choriotis nigricaps*) close to the Hullati Block of the Ranebennur Blackbuck Sanctuary in Karnataka. We had walked across the undulating grassy and gravelly terrain that stretched for over 1 km from the Hullati Block and were approaching a vast field of jowar (*Sorghum bicolor*) when we sighted a Kashmir Roller (*Coracias garrulus* Linnaeus) perched on a high branch projecting from a 2m tall *Prosopis juliflora* hedge that bordered the jowar field.

The pale bluish-green head, neck, breast and rest of the underparts and the pale chestnut upperparts drew our attention to it. The bird was not shy and permitted a close approach. One of us (RV), could get to within 4 m of

the bird. Twice we put the bird to flight and it returned to a perch within 6 m from the previous perch. In flight its wings clearly lacked the contrasting dark and light blue bands, and the rufous-brown breast of the Indian Roller (*C. benghalensis*) which was very common in the dry environs of Ranebennur.

The Kashmir Roller is known to breed in the N. W. Frontier of Pakistan, the Gilgit and in Kashmir. It migrates to Arabia and presumably to Africa in the autumn, commonly passing through Sind, Rajasthan and Northern Gujarat (Kutch and Saurashtra) (Ali and Ripley, 1970: 114). Stragglers are recorded as far east as Seoni District in Madhya Pradesh (Lakhnadon, 79°30'E) and south through Maharashtra (Dhulia, Khandala and Bombay) (Ali and Ripley, 1970: 114). Davidson (1898)